RELIGION WITHOUT RULES?

November 12, 1989

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

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Scripture
Micah 6:6-8
Luke 14:1-6

"Is it lawful to heal on the sabbath...?"
-Luke 14:3b (RSV)

A mile or so west of here a young woman is making a decision. She's just a girl actually, thirteen years old, almost fourteen; she's in the eighth grade. And today she knows that her worst fear has come true. She's pregnant. She is the third of six children in her family. The apartment has two bedrooms. Her parents both work and they are making it, but without much of a margin. She does well in school, is popular, active. But now she has a major problem. Should she tell her mother? Should she stay in school as long as she can: trade in her cheerleader uniform for maternity clothes, have the baby and be a fourteen year old parent, a child with a child? Where will she go? The apartment is already crowded. Who will keep the baby while she's at school? Will her mother quit her job and tend to the baby, or should she simply face the facts and drop out of school in order to be a mother like most of the others have done... Should she give the baby up for adoption? Or should she have an abortion? Does she think about the ethics of that situation? Does she think about the morality of the act that made her pregnant? Did he, her sixteen year old boyfriend? I doubt it. Besides the fact that God does not make sixteen year olds who ordinarily interrupt physical intimacy in order to have a meaningful discussion about the moral implications of what they are about to do, there is a sense in which they are simply doing what our culture has been inviting and urging them to do since they were old enough to watch television, listen to music, see the ads in magazines... No where in that world has anyone ever suggested that full expression of sexuality is ever anything but admirable, cool... So should he marry her? That's how we used to solve the dilemma; but he's in tenth grade.

Somewhere, not far from here a young girl is making that kind of decision. And somewhere not far from here a forty-four year old man sits in the intensive care waiting room at Northwestern Memorial Hospital and thinks about his father, seventy-five years old, who yesterday had a massive stroke, and who is alive because of the heroic and magnificent efforts of modern American medicine at its best. He and his father had talked about it some: what should or should not happen in a situation like this, but they hadn't resolved it, and now he must. The physician told

him, gently, that the damage was severe: with lots of assistance - respirators, feeding tubes, catheters - his father could live for some time. His care would be wonderful and enormously expensive. Insurance would pay for it, but his father was not going to get well. If he came out of the coma at all, he would not in any way be able to care for himself. So what to do? He's there now, trying to decide to ask the doctor to let his father die.

Where are the rules to help us with the moral dilemmas of modern life? Where is there a helpful resource for the thousands of women who are in that thirteen year old's situation, or a variation of it; or the forty-four year old son suddenly in a position he never wanted to be in - the determiner of life and death. Are there applicable rules? Does religion have anything to say? It depends, of course, on who you ask. There are some religionists who appear to know the mind of God with precision in the matter of the pregnant thirteen year old. Some even know precisely what is right and wrong for the dying seventy-five year old. But certainly, not all religion. In fact, we might even ask if religion should have precise answers for ethical dilemmas, rules to apply to every situation?

Let's reserve judgment on that one for a moment at least. My prior concern is that the resource of faith is not often part of the conversation before we get to the point of making decisions. In his fine new book, Theology for the Third Millennium, Hans Kung writes: "One thing has become clear enough: new models of theological interpretation do not simply come into existence because individual theologians tackle heated issues or sit down at their desks to construct new models, but because the traditional models have failed: because the 'problem solvers' of normal theology, in the face of a changed historical horizon, can find no satisfying answers for new major questions" [p. 143].

As with science, Kung says, religion that no longer resolves the puzzles assigned to it is irrelevant. In fact, when the church "hobbles behind history" the very life of religion is threatened [p. 221].

To translate: It is not helpful to address the pregnant thirteen year old's dilemma using an ethical model twenty-five years out of date. It is not helpful to confine the discussion of how to live responsibly with human sexuality to rules that don't apply anymore... Abstinence from full sexual relations before marriage is the ideal, the goal, but it never worked very much and it made more sense when marriage was in the picture sooner rather than later. But to limit the conversation to that model in this place at this time is not only to be unhelpful, it is to be grossly irrelevant and is, in my mind, one reason a whole generation of young Americans does not regard religion as a relevant resource in determining how to live.

The trouble with simple straight-forward rules as the approach to religious morality is that there are never enough of them to cover every situation. Once you decide that rules are the way to go, you need lots of them, and then rules to tell you which rules are important and when, and then you need people to interpret the rules and you have to legitimize their authority to do that so you need an elaborate hierarchy with built-in political and theological assumptions.

When you want religious rules, you get them, and you get something else, namely legalism, and that, as anyone familiar with the New Testament knows, is what got Jesus of Nazareth in trouble over and over again.

The text this morning is from the fourteenth chapter of Luke. It is one of seven in the Gospel which deals with the same issue. Jesus is having dinner in the home of a Pharisee. It is the Sabbath. The food was prepared the day before and kept warm overnight according to carefully detailed rules so that no one had to break the Sabbath Law. And in comes a man with dropsy. Some commentators suggest that he was sent in to precipitate the crisis which follows. Healing on the Sabbath was prohibited. The man wasn't going to die. Jesus could have honored the tradition and waited a few hours. Instead he poses the question: "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" They don't answer because they know and he knows that it is not legal to heal on the Sabbath. Jesus heals the man anyway and then asks simply, "which of you whose ox falls into a well, will not pull him out on the Sabbath?"

There are seven such incidents in the story and the cumulative effect is to tell us that the point is an important one. The point is that legalism is not what Jesus has in mind: that religious law does not encompass the morality that God expects. There were, to be exact, 613 separate rules in the religious law, which in Jesus' society was also the law of the land. There was a system which grew up around the law: Scribes were men who copied, taught and interpreted the law. Pharisees adhered to the law with great loyalty and conviction. Jesus' point here and throughout the story is that the law is good but it is not an end in itself. It is not always relevant or adequate. There is a higher morality - a more strenuous expectation. In this particular case the needs of this man take precedence over the Sabbath law, admirable as it was.

The conflict is not original with Jesus. Centuries before, the prophets blasted away at legalism and ritualism becoming a substitute for the righteousness God expects.

"With what shall I come before the Lord?" Micah asked. " Thousands of sacrificial animals, rivers of liturgical oil, wheel barrows full of rules and laws?"

"He has showed you what is good and required...
do justice
love kindness
walk humbly with God."

Why make such a fuss about it, Jesus? Why not wait till the sun goes down and Sabbath is over? Why not simply ask the man to wait around for a few hours and avoid this unnecessary confrontation? The reason is that legalism is not adequate... in fact there is a fatal flaw built into it, namely the assumption that God's expectations can be met through keeping the rules... Jesus pressed the point because there is a morality to which the law points, but is not encompassed by the law. Doing justice and loving kindness dictate, in this situation, breaking a religious rule in order to heal a man. God's morality requires creativity, freedom: a responsible person has to improvise to live as Jesus demands.

If there are no rules, are there guidelines here? Yes. Jesus honors the tradition always, but then makes the needs of the individual more important than the tradition. The worth of the individual, the worth of an individual human life is a moral criteria in the religion of Jesus: to do what is loving, what is kind and just is his requirement. The situation itself, the context, is a major factor. Ethical decisions are not made in a vacuum.

Episcopal ethical theologian, Joseph Fletcher, raised a lot of eyebrows when he wrote about it in a book, Situation Ethics, The New Morality, in which the individual brings the resources of religious law, moral tradition and his or her intelligence, imagination, strength and love, and for us, our discipleship, our faith in Jesus Christ into every situation. We are to do what is loving in every situation, said Fletcher, echoing St. Augustine who said that the Christian ethic could be stated this way: "Love and do as you please."

Fletcher and his new morality were roundly criticized for being permissive, lax and easy. Ironically, that was what they said about Jesus: his new morality was too permissive, too humanistic. It was what got him in a lot of trouble with the religious and political leaders. Even more ironic is the simple fact that Jesus' new morality, doing the loving, just and kind thing in every situation, is far more strenuous and demanding then relying on a rule to dictate behavior.

One thing is certain, and it is that our situation, our moment in time, is altogether new. We look nostalgically back to a simpler, easier day when deciding what was right and what was wrong was not so difficult. For me it was Saturday afternoon matinee Westerns. In that world things are primal, simple and clear. Evil can be contained easily in one neat character: a mean, low-down, unshaven stage coach bandit, who rolled cigarettes, drank whiskey from the bottle, abused woman and horses.

In the same way Good could be encompassed in an opposite characterization, a polite, clean shaven, gentleman who never smoked, stood at the bar without drinking, who was faithful to his girl and his horse, who became violent only reluctantly, in response to evil, which he always overcame in the end. Somehow Roy Rogers could fight the bandit all over the barroom, out through the swinging doors, onto the dusty street, without even wrinkling his shirt. How sweet it was!

Things were never that simple, but neither have they ever been so complex as they are, ethically, today. Thirteen year olds were not as sexually active. Pregnancy before marriage was resolved ordinarily by marriage and a whole social structure that could be bent to accommodate early and unplanned marriages and children. Massive stroke patients died. And drugs, perhaps the major ethical dilemma facing our nation, simply hadn't happened yet. Grass was something you mowed. Coke was five cents a bottle, and the very word sex wasn't said in mixed company.

On a broader plane the diminishing size of our global community and global economy has increased the ethical complexity of every issue. If we win the cocaine war we will ruin the economies of several South American

nations. When the price of petroleum goes up you and I pay a few more pennies per gallon for gasoline, people with stock in oil companies make a little money and people in the Third World begin to go hungry because their countries can't afford to buy fertilizer.

Closer to home - much, much closer - is the issue of abortion. Every time we seem to be moving toward a consensus or a kind of uneasy truce, something happens to put the issue in front of us and to escalate the rhetoric. Last January the Supreme Court decided to hear arguments on a State of Missouri statute, Webster vs. Reproductive Health Services, and on July 9 the Court rendered a decision which could change the situation drastically for women who wish to terminate pregnancy by abortion.

In the meantime, to the delight of some and the chagrin of others, the President has vetoed legislation which would have provided access to safe, legal abortion to poor women, and threatens to veto a foreign aid bill which will provide desperately needed family planning and birth control information and supplies for Third World Nations because of abortion policies in China [Chicago Tribune, November 7, 1989]. It is, as the papers remind us daily, much more than a matter of personal morality.

What are the facts?

There are between 1.5 and 1.6 million abortions performed in this country every year.

30% of all pregnancies are terminated in abortion, the majority of them in clinics.

90% of all abortions happen in the first 12 weeks.

99% in the first 20 weeks.

Prior to Roe vs. Wade in 1973, 7,000 women died per year as a result of illegal and botched abortions.

The Surgeon General's office was commissioned to do a study to identify long term physical and emotional damage incurred by women who elect to have abortions. Surgeon General Koop reported that there is no scientific evidence of physical or emotional health problems as a result of abortion.

Feelings run very deeply beyond this point. Sometimes they are shouted through bull horns or chanted on picket lines. A Roman Catholic Bishop last week compared abortion to Nazi atrocities and people who are undecided - uneasy about the state interfering in a woman's right to decide a matter of enormous consequence for herself - are labeled murderers. When anti-abortion and pro-choice advocates meet on television, the result is frustrating, exasperating - the "dialogue of the deaf" someone called it recently.

The Dean of the Yale University Law School says it is the "thorniest belief conflict in America today." [See Second Opinion, Vol. 20, March

1989] And after intentionally not mentioning it from this pulpit because of the intensity of feelings on this issue, but also because Presbyterians begin with a preference for openness and respect for differing opinions among fellow Christians, I am choosing to do so today simply because I believe our voice should be a part of the amplified public conversation. There are, that is to say, Christian positions on the question quite different from the ones that make all the news.

The American Jewish Congress was helpful by putting it this way:

"The conflict over abortion is not between 'secularists' and 'religionists,' between 'moral' people who value life and 'immoral' people who do not, but between different moral traditions, different understandings of the sacredness of life." [New York Times, 2/28/89]

The position of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church has been and is solidly on the side of freedom of choice in the matter of abortion.

The policy statement which guides the National Church, but is not at all binding on individual Presbyterians holds that:

1) we are all responsible stewards of the gift of life.

2) family planning and the use of contraceptive devices is an expression of that responsible stewardship.

3) the church is committed to minimizing the incidence of abortion by encouraging sex education in public schools, churches, homes, and use of contraceptives to avoid unwanted pregnancy.

In addition, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church affirms Rowe vs. Wade and opposes attempts to limit access to abortion, and currently is engaging in a major national study on the entire topic of human sexuality and all the attendant ethical issues.

The Presbyterian position on this thorniest of conflicts is to respect other positions, to support and allow the right of other positions to be advocated by their adherents - churches, organizations - but to resist having those positions enforced as law.

The theological basis for our position is Calvinism and its emphasis on personal liberty and responsibility. John Calvin said: "For he who has set the limits of our life has at the same time entrusted to us its care." So, we come down on the side of the right of a woman to decide... We also come down on the responsibility of a society to deal with the conditions which produce the problem in the first place. We are not pro-abortion. There are many of us who do not like abortion, do not consider it a personal option and will continue praying for and working for a world in which abortion is unnecessary: a world in which every child is wanted, and every child has access to stability, health care, education, safe and clean housing, and some real measure of hope for the future.

We are called to live with enormous uncertainty, Bill Coffin has written. We are called to live boldly and as faithfully as we can in a brave new world with moral dilemmas that often will not be reduced to simple rules.

What we have going for us, as we do so, is the promise of forgiveness when we are less than perfect and the grace of Jesus Christ which frees us to live in the world as responsible individuals.

What we have going for us, as we attempt to live responsibly, is a God who cares desperately about the human situation, a God who in Jesus Christ lived in our flesh, experienced our humanness, even its moral ambiguities, a God who will be with the young girl and the man as they struggle with their dilemmas, not dictating rules but being with them in their struggle, and with you and me as we make difficult daily decisions about how to live faithfully.

What we have going for us is not a rule for every situation, but a Lord who has promised to walk with us, to exult with us when we exult and to weep when we weep and to agonize when we agonize. And while that is not easy news it is very good news indeed.

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We confess, O God, that we do not have all the answers. We confess that much of our lives are lived on the edge of mystery. So, forgive us when we make mistakes and miss the mark. Give us courage to live fully in the world. Give us wisdom to make decisions which are responsible and just and pleasing in your sight. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Note: The positions of The Presbyerian Church (U.S.A) on the issues addressed in this sermon are contained in the policy statements: The Covenant of Life and the Caring Community, and Covenant and Creation: Theological Reflections on Contraception and Abortion, which were adopted by the 195th General Assembly (1983) of The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A). Both policy statements will be available in the office of Fourth Presbyterian Church.